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Embracing intersectionality to create a collective living theory of practice

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Embracing intersectionality to create a collective living theory of practice

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe pivotal experiences that have shaped our respective professional journeys when teaching action research. We situate these experiences in relation to how they have contributed to our collective living theory of practice. This discussion unfolded as we explored ways to improve our own practices and the practices of our students. We conclude that this and similar questions can only be authentically answered when we as practitioners and faculty in higher education settings are willing to interrogate the contexts within which we interact and the complex intersections between our own intentional practices and selves and our students' willingness to engage in critical discourse.

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The prelude

Different venues brought us to participatory action research. I (Nathalis) took many courses in research methods during graduate school but did not learn about action research or participatory action research. Instead, I discovered participatory action research while conducting a hand search of research methods books on the shelves of a bookstore. I found the 1991 volume edited by Orlando Fals-Borda and Mohammad Anisur Rahman entitled *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. The back cover of the book read:

> PAR had its origin in the work of Third World social scientists two decades ago as they brought new ways to empower the oppressed by helping them to acquire reliable knowledge on which to construct countervailing power. It has since spread throughout the world, as reflected in this book with contributions from Asia, Africa, Latin America and North America in the form of case studies of actual experience with the PAR approach.

This was the first time I heard of participatory action research; this discovery sent me on a learning spiral. I felt that I needed to familiarize myself with the various terminologies used in the literature to describe participatory action research e.g., action research, participatory action research, collaborative inquiry, applied research, participatory action, and appreciative inquiry to name a few. These terms tended to follow a pattern identified by Reason (1994). He described two camps of action-oriented researchers: the Northern school and the Southern school. Northerners tended to focus on action as in action research and Southerners tended to focus on participation as in participatory research. While some proponents would like to dismiss this distinction, my sense is that the adoption of any terminology reveals the context and the culture within which pivotal concepts are used. This distinction was important to me as I tried to assess the contributions of various scholars. The concept of action reminds me of Taylorism and the cult of efficiency, while the concept of participation reminds me of the notion of community.

I conducted participatory action research for the first time in my own classroom. At the beginning of class I shared my action research journey with the students. I proposed that we collectively learned about participatory action research. We had books, how-to manuals, and critical friends willing to guide us in the process. One of my colleagues had suggested to me that one of the best ways to learn participatory action research was to do it. This first course was an experience of trial and error but one from which I learned a great deal. I confronted my inexperience in teaching and understanding the subject in depth. I provided guidance on deciding about our grounding question and we came up with "How do we motivate ourselves to fully participate in this class?" The course evolved into an action research project and was published elsewhere (Wamba et. al., 2007).

I (Sara) learned about action research roughly 10 years ago in a conversation that unfolded during the question and answer period that followed a presentation I had just concluded. I was in the midst of a multi-stage interview for a lecturer position at the college where Nathalis and I both teach. In my presentation I showcased the benefits of infusing professional coaching strategies (Joyce & Showers, 1982; Knight, 2007) to engage graduate level special education teacher candidates in self-directed inquiry, research, and problem solving to address professional challenges. Although familiar with group and single subject research, I had never heard of action research. By way of context, I had close to 20 years of experience as a practitioner, consultant, and professional coach and had been teaching and advising graduate special education students at the college for four years.

When I finished my talk I fielded a number of questions, including a series of thoughtful and pointed ones that Nathalis asked about the strategies that I had employed. As others in attendance dispersed, we had a spirited conversation about the parallels between the coaching and self-directed inquiry strategies that I had implemented and action research. This presentation launched my full-time career in higher education and fortuitously set in motion the professional collaboration that inspired this paper.

The challenges in developing a critical living theory of practice

Whitehead (2008) wrote "A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work" (p. 104). Some have suggested that the rationale for a living theory of practice reflects the need to answer the question "How do I improve my practice?" A critical living theory of practice goes beyond one's own practice to the practice of others as embedded in the socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts within which these practices take place. In order to address this question with integrity we have to draw on our individual creativity, essential selves, and identities. To improve both practice and knowledge, we must explore this question in context, that is, in relation to these dimensions and the historical and cultural opportunities and constraints that have shaped us (Whitehead, 2008). This shift leads to deeper questions such as, "How do I improve my practice and the practice of others," "how do we collectively interrogate and challenge the impact of the various contexts within which our practices take place," and "how do my unique experiences strengthen my practices?" As teachers and educators we operate in uneven socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. We must confront what it means to improve our own practices and those of others in the neoliberal environments that surround us. This question carries epistemological significance; its answers hold the potential for transformation.

Understanding current educational policy in the United States requires that it be situated in a global context. Education has always been the site of struggle.

However, this struggle in the US and other countries has taken a neoconservative twist exposed as the "conservative restoration" (Apple, 2000). This reflects an alliance among neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a portion of an upwardly mobile new middle class. Neoliberals advocate that what is private is good and that what is public is bad. They also advocate for stances and actions that emphasize the strong state and a return to Western tradition and patriotism. This social undercurrent is relevant for us as educators in that this alliance—and more centrally its neoliberal stance holds a vision of students as human capital and of schools as instrumental in training teachers as bureaucrats not consumers (Apple, 2000).

Universities are large systems of authoritative control, standardization, accountancy, classification, credits/penalties, and graduation (Chetty, 2011). Greenwood (2012) argued that universities operate in neoliberal and Tayloristic structures. Further the myriad versions of neoliberal "new public management" models that have been applied in university settings threaten to diminish the potential impacts of higher education. Curricular homogenization and pressures to "dumb down" content force faculty to teach to standardized tests rather than to educate students and emerging professionals. Universities are substituting the pursuit of free knowledge for the pursuit of credits. These conditions have increasingly challenged each of us as educators and scholars. In this paper we share our collaborative journey of confronting these challenges through critical discourse and inquiry.

The birth of our collaboration

I (Nathalis) am the coordinator of an Educational Leadership program that offers graduate candidates two pathways for certification as school leaders. The School Building Leader program (SBL) is a 30-credit program that is open to certified teachers with a Masters' degree; they must have a minimum of three years of teaching experience in either public or private school. The School District Leadership (SDL) program is a six-credit extension program that is open to school professionals who have completed the SBL program and are interested in working at the school district level. All candidates in the SDL program are required to complete a mandatory action research course. Nearly all of them work full time as teachers in the public school system and many are school administrators. Each day they in/directly experience the trickle down impacts and irrationality of the neoliberal policies that have been—and continue to be imposed in public education.

The SDL program has been in existence for about 10 years and as it grew in size an additional section of the action research course had to be added. I invited Sara to teach the new section. Since then we have been teaching this course and informally sharing our experiences. We believe that it is imperative for our students to consciously choose whether to be a part of or create solutions for the systemic problems that surround them. We encourage and challenge them to seek

productive ways to address these challenges by engaging them in critical dialogue that is in large part centered on their own professional needs and those of their respective students and constituents. This requires us and them to look below, above, and beyond the constraints subsumed in education reforms such as The No Child Left Behind Legislation and Race to the Top initiatives that have blurred the bounds of school governance, professional oversight, deregulation, competition, school choice, and the entire landscape of school accountability (Hess & Kelly, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). It also compels us to work with students in ways that cross socially construed professional roles and boundaries (Soja, 1996).

This paper is a collaborative reflection of our separate and shared experiences about what has been happening to us as we have been teaching our action research classes. We describe some of the pivotal experiences that led each of us to interrogate our respective identities and practices and how this critical inquiry has deepened our pedagogies. Last, we discuss the transformative possibilities that emerge through discourse, reflection, and adoption of our collective living theory of practice.

Teaching action research

The need for clarity of self

Nathalis. Unlike Sara who applied her direct experience with action research into the classroom, I (Nathalis) was ill prepared to teach action research. For several years it felt strange teaching action research because I never felt ownership of the subject matter. It seemed like a subject that was beyond me. In her article on the teaching challenges of participatory action research Paule McNicoll (1999) mentioned the need to adopt a new research perspective. She discussed tensions between grading and modeling; the realization that ethical considerations sometimes hide social control elements; limitations of traditional semesters' time frames; tensions between research and action; and the need to attend to group process and other learning behaviors while teaching action research. I certainly did experience some of these tensions in addition to the tyranny of neoliberal educational policies that affected the teachers in my courses. These neoliberal policies, including the tendency to deskill teachers by forcing them to embrace a Tayloristic pedagogy, greatly affected my students. They came to class not focused on their own learning but rather uncritically driven by the narrative of the current neoliberal educational policies. It was frustrating that my students did not see themselves as intellectuals but rather as factory workers whose primary job was to implement the curriculum as dictated. I challenged students by asking how many saw themselves as intellectuals and only three students raised their hands. When I inquired about the rest of the class I got no answer.

I continued to find myself distracted by a nagging sense that I did not fully own the subject matter of this course. This changed dramatically in 2015. At that time, I attended the Third Annual Conference of the Action Research Network of the

Americas (ARNA) in Toronto, Canada, in 2015. The conference started with a ceremony performed by First Nation People. Then came Dr. Budd Hall, one of the keynote speakers, who started his speech with the following words:

> My name is Budd Hall. I am a settler Canadian of mostly English heritage. As I begin I first acknowledge the First Nations of the Huron and Credit River Mississauga First Nations on whose traditional territory we are meeting today. I also acknowledge the unceded territory of the Lekwungen and WSÁ NEĆ First Nations on whose traditional territory I have the privilege of living and working. . .. I want to share with you a bit more about today my story so that you will know that my acknowledgement of those who have been on this land for thousands of years is more than a case of respectful behavior. I am standing here today in Toronto as a speaker as a direct result of my great grandparents obtaining 200 acres of Halalt First Nations traditional territory through illegal or immoral means in the last quarter of the 19th Century. Prior to the acquisition of this rich and productive land, my settler ancestors were landless and poor having travelled from England to Australia and then to Eastern Canada finally to Vancouver Island in search of a way to support themselves and their children. Those 200 acres of Halalt Traditional territory transformed my family into the middle class and all of my great grandparents children on down to myself have had the opportunity to study and achieve positions of importance in their lives. Every settler in Canada has such a story. Most of these stories are invisible. They are hidden knowledge.

I had never heard someone be so blunt. The more he spoke, the more I began to identify with what he was saying. Dr. Hall situated himself in the context by revealing his full identity. If he was a settler in Canada, who was I in the United States?

I came to the US from a country that was a former Belgian colony. My family was part of the upper middle class. The United States quickly turned that reality upside down. People saw me first as a Black person, second as an immigrant, and third as marginal. Interestingly, I was also the recipient of a Western education from which I learned that Africa has contributed nothing to the world. I have become an expert at other people's knowledge that I would gladly transmit to my students.

Listening to Budd Hall put me in touch with my Self. To be that teacher of action research I needed to situate myself (Black, immigrant, marginal, etc.). I realized that I was teaching action research as a methods course. I became more aware that action research is much more than a method. Rather, it is a disposition. I continue to struggle to grasp what Elliot (2011) intended when she wrote "action research is not a trowel for digging information, rather it is a political stance derived from conditions of inequality and oppression" (p. 1). She added "Foundational thinkers such as Fals-Borda conceived their work as being intrinsically linked to the social transformation objectives of Third World liberationists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Paulo Freire, Julius Nyerere and Camilo Torres" (p. 1).

It dawned on me that I needed to confront those conditions of inequality and oppression as they created the self in me, the myself. Feldman (1997) writes "The recognition that people exist as part of situations allows us to see that to teach is more than knowing and reasoning" (p. 4). So when we reflect about our teaching we must remember that the world as we experience it is a human construction and that the images that arise through reflection are images of what we each are (Sartre, 1956).

Sara. Early on when teaching action research, I found myself grappling with ways to best encourage and support students as they engaged in self-directed action research projects. I had always relied on a combination of curiosity, warmth, and cognitively mediated strategies to navigate my teaching roles and responsibilities. This approach resonated well with my overarching professional identity and commitment to inquiry and service. While I had successfully integrated my accrued practitioner experience into my teaching practices I felt that I could do more to activate my students' authentic commitment to their own professional development. These musings led me to reflectively interrogate the extent to which I had assimilated my own unique experiences into my teaching. That is, as I worked to engage students in critical inquiry, I found myself explicitly examining the ways that my identity as a woman who had experienced sexual harassment and physical assault and a Jew who had dealt with repeated acts of anti-Semitism had impacted and shaped my professional voice. As I moved through this reflective spiral I considered how these experiences strengthened and/or constrained my contributions and willingness to express my full sense of self in my teaching.

This journey of exploring, fine tuning, and claiming my full voice has been at times disruptive, complicated, and empowering. My experiences of violence and harassment left powerful impressions and imprints on my psyche. At different stages of reconciling these influences I adopted strategies that subtly and explicitly compartmentalized my interactions. I had selectively restricted the depth to which I participated across professional, social, and political interactions in my effort to contain my perceived sense of vulnerability and risk. As I advanced in my career to support children and adults with disabilities, I drew on the actionable impacts of my training and deeply rooted values for service that had been transferred to me by my culturally observant Jewish parents. However, I would argue that my professional presence remained somewhat hollow while I hovered above and around understanding that my choices to compartmentalize clouded my interactions and undermined my autonomy.

Like many women who have been affected by physical violence, I needed to (again) revisit the ways that I had internalized these experiences as shameful and/or evidence of weakness. As I constructed a unifying living theory of practice I incrementally disentangled, dismantled, and reframed these experiences (De Laine, 2000; Gillies & Alldred, 2002) in ways that privileged my gender-dependent "categories" of experience (Ezzy, 2002). This positioned me to elevate,

contextualize, and advance interactions to enhance students' ability to focus both on their own self-selected professional growth and inquiry to affect social change.

Action research pedagogy

Sara. I understand that what most people see when they meet me is that I am a white, now close to middle aged woman. I find that I am often ascribed status, beliefs, and experiences that are in many ways foreign to me. As I have come to reconcile these and other conflicting inputs that have impacted my living practices (Whitehead, 2009), I have consciously woven my understandings about power and its use/abuse into my action research pedagogy. Although my unified living theory of practice is not exclusively gender regulated (Gillies & Alldred, 2002), I believe that it renders my social justice based priorities and practices transparent to students and therefore available for exchange.

I enact a pedagogy of safety and criticality when I teach action research. While I do not bring my personal experiences into course interactions, I frame my pedagogy as being rooted in personal, social justice, and emancipatory stances. I explain my desire and intentions to foster an atmosphere and interactions that (a) privilege free expression without censor and (b) are devoid of misappropriated social status, authority, or veiled use of disproportionate power to influence discourse. I elicit students' input about how to foster this atmosphere and engage them early on in conversations to generate a collective understanding of the parameters that will best ensure their safe learning and willingness to explore new ways of producing knowledge. By also adopting stances informed by third space theory (Bhabha, 1990; 1994; Soja, 1996), I actively work throughout the semester to traverse the "insider/outsider" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and role-governed spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) that can create disruptive distance between me and my students. As I support them to design their own action research projects I encourage students to explore the role, professional, cultural, and other influences that advance/constrain their sense of agency.

I recognize the limits and potentially conflicting impacts of strategies that prioritize critical inquiry and safety. By safety I intend to suggest forms of exchange that allow for confrontation of the mind and spirit and that foster boundary crossing understandings rather than those that assert dominance through institutional or other forms of "assumed" power (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). I acknowledge my inherently biased understandings and the ways that I translate these into practice. However these understandings inform my effort to support and stimulate students' critical exploration of the "reifying, significant, endorsable stories" that anchor their personal–professional identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 14). I believe that as students reflexively examine these perceptions and beliefs while conducting action research they become better able to articulate the values that define their own evolving professional goals and imperatives. At the same time, I actively acknowledge that for some students, the form of critical discourse that permeates how I teach and engage in action research may be uncomfortable,

render them vulnerable, and in fact not feel safe at all. These tensions surface at different times, in varying levels of intensity, and in unpredictable ways. I continue to confront the ebbs and flow of pedagogies that at times manifest in disruptive ways as I strive to concurrently honor and respect my own and my students' differing ways of approaching individual learning and professional development.

Nathalis. As a result of the realizations that Budd Hall inspired I began to adopt an existential approach to action research. Feldman (1997) writes "an existential approach to teaching can help teachers to gain an authentic image of themselves as practitioners" (p. 2). What existentialism attempts to do is to help people acknowledge that they have freedom to choose, that their choices effect the situations in which they are immersed, and their choices define who they are. We are aware that we create ourselves and are therefore responsible for our own essence. We are also aware that our choices and actions affect others. I was compelled to make a choice and it was to come back to reality and to recognize who I am. I had to de-westernize myself and take ownership of action research because it was there first and foremost for me. I began to interrogate structures of oppression in academia. These included, but were far from limited to academic monopoly on knowledge production and androcentric bias in knowledge production. This is where I began to develop my activist stance as a scholar. I had to choose between teaching action research as a method course or my own living theory of practice. I was aware that this course would remain a requirement for most of my students yet I hoped for some it might become a way of life.

One case in particular comes to mind. During class, a candidate complained that her students were undisciplined, noncompliant, and arrogant. "Why describe them this way?" her colleagues challenged. She had a powerful "aha" moment when she shared that one of her students had told her, "I would rather be in a dentist office having a root canal than be in this test preparation class." As her colleagues probed, she realized and then acknowledged "Maybe I forgot how to teach since I spent so much time training students." This was a teacher who had won numerous accolades from her school and district administrators. Through dialogue with her peers she came to see that she had developed expertise to "train" and that this had overtaken her focus.

Challenging neoliberal unconsciousness

As school leader and teacher educators, we routinely face challenges that are subsumed in the authoritarianism of university policies and traditions. However we must find ways to simultaneously (a) give voice to our own social justice agendas and (b) activate our students' dispositions/willingness to confront the neoliberal policies that assault them in their work/school environments. We carry to class our values of equity, among others, as do, we hope, our colleagues and students. We embrace a stance of intersectionality to create a collective living theory of practice. To come back to the original question about how to improve our own practices, we conclude

that this question can only be answered through critical discourse that assesses the pivotal impacts of the contexts within which our practices unfold. Further, and perhaps more substantively, this question can only be tackled if we ourselves are willing to scrutinize and transparently expose the confluence of the social, cultural, political, economic, and other experiences that have cumulatively impacted our practices. Unfortunately this form of scrutiny is rarely encouraged or rewarded.

Neoliberal invasion has been assimilated unconsciously by many of our students. We see and hear this in comments such as, "Just tell me what I need to do," and "But I was told that I must do x when this situation occurs in my school." While to some extent these and similar comments may reflect a failure of public education to encourage independent, critical, and higher order thinking, we believe that they reflect increasing trends to vocationalize the preparation of education leaders and special education teachers. This is evidenced in frequent comments such as, "I am not really interested in being a school administrator but these additional credits will give me a pay raise," "This job is not easy; I don't know why I need all this pressure," and "I just want to use this degree to get a full time job."

We must find new ways to awaken ourselves, our colleagues, and our students/ school leaders. Our failure to do so tacitly endorses practices that continue to anesthetize our social consciousness. Toward this end, we must give voice to the disparate and overlapping professional and personal experiences that undergird our individual and collective social-political inter/action. This is crucial if we wish to engage our students in social justice learning and action. These imperatives require us to be willing to be vulnerable and to be known. In this more transparent context of openness, authenticity, and vulnerability, we will be able to support and guide our students to tolerate dissonance while seeking solutions for their own localized problems of practice. By partnering with students in stances that honor "both/and also" perceptions about knowledge production and evolving truths (Bhabha, 1990; 1994; Soja, 1996) we elevate criticality and knowledge production rather than suppress creativity and new social understandings.

Although at once complicated, perhaps idealistic, and incredibly messy (Goodnough, 2008), we endeavor to adopt strategies that place critical teaching and learning at the center of our action research pedagogy. Our collective theory of practice is grounded by our willingness to consciously disrupt stances that place primacy on vocationalized priorities, traditional views of instructor-student relationships, and contrived measurable units as proxy for meaningful knowledge. We continue to refine our collective living theory of practice through discourse and by explicitly challenging/ enabling our students and ourselves to confront and reconcile the unproductive "truths" that disrupt their/our ability to advance social justice (Gutiérrez, 2008; Soja, 1996). We acknowledge that it remains unclear to us what it truly means to improve our individual and collective practices. This and similar questions must be asked if we wish to combat the as yet uncalculated costs of practices that deskill the teacher workforce. This stance empowers our students and colleagues to determine the relative merits of what we offer to them and each other. It also firmly positions our school leaders and special education teachers to seek out and integrate newly

produced knowledge and expertise into their professional repertoire—and apply it to advance meaningful social progress (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010).

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Nathalis G Wamba is a full professor and the program coordinator of the Educational Leadership Program at Queens College, City University of new York. His research focus includes but is not limited to postcolonial and postmodern studies, critical theory, participatory action research, education policy and leadership. He is the co-author of "*Exit Narratives; Reflections of four retired teachers*" by University Press of America and the editor of "*Poverty and Literacy*" by Routledge.